

THE EXPEDIENT

By William Chester Estabrook

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TWILIGHT drifted across the hills as old Dr. Richel came out of his house and went down into the village. A tawny, spring swollen stream slipped with a gurgling sound beneath the worn boards of the pike bridge. The dust lay in puffers from a recent rain. Mingled country odors filled the air.

The physician passed the general store that had belonged to Joseph Rittenhouse. He looked in and waved a friendly greeting to Joey Rittenhouse, the dead Joseph's son and the store's present proprietor. Joey was wearing a blue serge coat and a pair of white duck trousers. The combination was new to the village. At sight of it the physician's keen eyes narrowed. He went on down the street to a small house that reached up like a brown hand to the bending oaks. A bracelet of green dooryard encircled it.

Its gate was open for the convenience of those who passed daily through it, not from shiftlessness. The front room was filled with the tenuous dusk, but the one beyond was lit by a big lamp that flowered like a yellow bulb. Beside it a woman worked. She was a little sandy thing, between fifty and sixty, in a rough skirt and green flannel waist. The pins thrust into the breast of it were like an insignia. She had a tape measure about her neck.

"Good evening, Electra," the physician called from the door step.

"Why, it's you. Is it, doctor?" she exclaimed. "Come right in. I got my lap full of stuff, so I won't get up if you'll excuse my manners. Sit down there in appy's chair."

She thrust the chair forward with her foot and, with her foot also, drew toward her one of those pneumatic forms over which women fit their gowns and began to drape the classic flowered silk folds.

"I suppose you don't recognize the lady, do you?" she suggested with her crinkling smile.

Dr. Richel stretched his old legs out before him and, tipping his head quizzically, regarded the graceful figure.

"No, I'm afraid I don't," he admitted with an amused look.

"It's Mrs. Percyfield."

"Is it, indeed?"

Electra McCullum gave the headless form an emphatic pat and stuck a tentative pin in here and there. "It's the image of her. It's her to the last fraction of a curve."

"My acquaintance with Mrs. Percyfield is not intimate," the old physician gravely observed.

Miss McCullum's lips set thinly. Her faded blue eyes twinkled beneath their sandy brows.

"Mine is," she said succinctly.

Dr. Richel looked over at her questioningly. His tone was careless.

"Just how much do you happen to know about her, Electra?" he inquired.

She bit off the end of her thread and, suspending it and her needle in the air, regarded him with eyes as keen as his own.

"I know she's the prettiest woman that ever came to this town."

"Umph!" His fingers mused the fringe of her chenille table cover. "Prettier than Minnie Heston, for instance?"

"Prettier, according to the ordinary man's idea of beauty. A painter or a sculptor would choose Min."

"I was not thinking of the painter or the sculptor," he mused.

"No," said she quickly, "you was thinking of Joey Rittenhouse."

A little silence fell. She broke it by flinging a sudden, sharp question at him:—

"What is it that Nature puts in some women that the don't put in others? It's not good looks nor sense, the Lord knows. But it makes all the difference."

He shook his head. "I think I understand what you mean, Electra," he said slowly.

Dr. Richel's Activity.

With quite unnecessary vehemence she whirled the needless figure about.

A smile tugged at the corners of the physician's eyes.

"Tell me what else you know about Mrs. Percyfield?"

"She's come here to marry. Anybody can see that with half an eye. She's not the kind to make her own living, and then there's those two children—and such children! The Stutsmans won't keep her forever, even if she is related to them. They've made up their mind to marry her off, and she's made up her mind to be married off—and married she'll be, you'll see."

She swung the figure about again with a clattering of iron rollers. She touched the flowered folds significantly.

"You know what this dress is for, don't you?"

"They haven't gone as far as that, have they?" he gasped.

She laughed. Her laughter had a fresh, clear sound.

"Taint the wedding dress. The Stutsmans are going to give a big party for her. A lawn fête, where everybody dresses in fancy dress. Not masked, you understand; just fancy costumes. She's going to be a Dresden shepherdess." She paused, in the rhythmic swing of the needle and looked at him with pregnant eyes. "She'll land her lamb, all right!"

Another silence fell. Silences were common between them. It was the distinct uncomfatableness of this one that made it unusual.

"Imagine Joey with a wife ten years older than



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himself—she's thirty-two if she's a day—and two children!" she laughed out sharply. "But you couldn't make him see it like it is, not if you talked to him till you dropped over. Maybe if his mother was at home she could influence him. But nobody else can."

The physician's gentle face was full of serious anxiety.

"I'll break Min Heston's heart," Miss McCullum continued. "That is, if hearts really break nowadays. She's so shy and proud she won't think of fighting for her rights. She'll just stay home and shut herself in. And this—this Pamela in her shepherd's garb, she'll— She gave the innocent image of the absent Mrs. Percyfield a vigorous punch and put down her needle. "When a woman wants to bring a man to the proposal point, and nothing else will do it, she always gets up a fancy dress affair where she can powder her hair and paint her cheeks and wear pink rosebuds. Ever notice?"

Dr. Richel arose with a sigh.

"I'm sorry you regard the situation as really grave, Electra," he said. "Mama's been worrying, but I thought her overanxious."

Electra McCullum put aside her work and moved with him toward the door. She looked at him wistfully. The village was in the habit of turning to him in times of anxiety as well as in illness. His mission had been one of healing to other hurts and ills than those of the body alone.

"You can't think of anything to do, can you?" she questioned. "Seems as if it ain't real friendly to Joey's ma to stand by in her absence and let this thing happen."

He stood in the doorway looking down the shadowy street. The pale lamplight touched his grave old face and his uncovered white head.

"It doesn't, does it? We must see what we can do. When is this party?"

"Friday—day after to-morrow. I've got to work my fingers off to finish that dress, or she'll have hysterics again."

"Eh?" he queried, turning back to her. "What's that?"

"Oh, she's that kind all right, for all her posing as being so brave and serene." Electra nodded. "She had an awful fit of 'em one day because she couldn't find any lavender sewing silk in town. Imagine that kind of a woman as Mrs. Rittenhouse's daughter-in-law! Oh, it's awful, Doctor. Poor, foolish Joey!"

The physician smiled his indescribably moving smile—that half merry, half gentle smile that was as familiar to the village as his sturdy old figure itself.

"Don't be too hard on him, Electra. He didn't invent that special kind of weakness, you know."

As he passed the Rittenhouse store he saw that Joey had left it in charge of a clerk, and when he came to the Rittenhouse residence, further down the street, the boy bolted out of the gate with one hand full of honeysuckle and the other fumbling with the smart bow tie beneath his cleft brown chin.

His Love for the Boy.

He was a straight, handsome, impulsive lad, with a way that won him immediate friends and another way that kept them. The physician loved him almost like a son.

"Well, Joey?" he greeted him.

The boy brought up in some confusion.

"I was just taking a few sprays of honeysuckle to Mrs. Percyfield," he explained. "She's so fond of flowers and the Stutsmans' honeysuckle isn't blooming yet."

"I see," said Dr. Richel.

"I guess you know Mrs. Percyfield, don't you?" Joey inquired, with an admirable show of offhandness. "She's pretty fine. It does a fellow good to see a woman bear things like she bears 'em."

"M-m! How's that, Joey?"

"Well, you see, she's gone through a lot. Her husband must have been a brute. She had to leave him. But she never complains. She's game, all right. The Stutsmans say the way she met it was splendid."

Dr. Richel did not comment. He was thinking of the lavender sewing silk.

"It's to be hoped somebody will be able to make up to her some day for all she's suffered," the boy said as he went off.

The physician continued on his way home. He shook his wise old head.

"I don't suppose a man ever lived who at Joey's age didn't want to 'make it up' to some woman older than himself—a widow, nine times out of ten, with at least one child." A chuckle slipped out of his throat. "My widow had three!"

He looked back at the old Rittenhouse home. It was the only one in town that pretended to stateliness. How admirably it fitted Joey's mother! The physician could see her there in her garden with her flowers. He could see her in the homey old living room. He could see her everywhere about the house. And he could not endure to see Mrs. Percyfield there, even in his imagination. The very idea of it hurt him. He knew how her presence would hurt his old friend Mary Rittenhouse. And to think of those unmannerly youngsters being turned loose in such a place! It was unthinkable!

A light streaming from a softly curtained window across the street attracted his attention and he deliberately went over. He had no intention of prying, but he certainly stopped and strained his eyes through the dusk at the girl who sat inside the room embroidering roses on a piece of white linen. Now she worked feverishly, now dropped her work and sat staring absently into space, the toe of her shoe stirring the hem of her gown. She was a fresh colored, cleanly cut young person, with no more pretence than the flower she embroidered or than her simple gown itself. As he looked at her he thought of what Electra McCullum had said about her:—"A painter or a sculptor would choose Min." The pure profile of her face reminded him of the faces of ivory and of marble he had seen.

He sighed. He knew the world well. He knew youth and its easy impressionism. He knew the chance a girl like this would have against the woman who had come adventuring among them.

When he reached home he did not go into the house at once, but sat down on a little bench beneath the walnut tree he had planted fifty years before. He leaned his head against the trunk and stared up at the clouds.

It took him a long time to go to sleep that night, and then he dreamed of the eternal triangle of the man and two women. At breakfast he was distraught. His face showed his anxiety. He picked absently at his fish balls.

"What in the world have you got on your mind, father?" his daughter-in-law inquired when the children had finished their breakfast and her husband had left the table.

The physician arose and pushed back his chair. There was no twinkle left in his keen old eyes. They were harassed.

"I've got Dresden shepherdesses," he said.

The Expedient.

He was doing up powders for Lizzy Wilson when he had his idea! It came to him like a flash, and he could hardly wait to get Wilson out of the office. The instant he was gone he grabbed his old felt hat and went off at a trot down the hill toward Electra McCullum's.

Electra was on her knees before Mrs. Percyfield's dress form.

She looked around it at him as he appeared startlingly in her inner door.

"Mercy! What is it?" she mumbled about a mouthful of pins.

He sat down, panting. He was seventy-one; you do not go up a hill or come down it at seventy-one without feeling it.

"I've thought of a way to save Joey Rittenhouse if you'll help me," he said.

"I'll do anything," said she, "but don't you try to tell me about it for a minute. I got some of that cherry shrub you liked so well last year. I'll get it." She whisked out of the room and into it again with a tall, thin glass on a tray. "Take it," she commanded. "And if Marna scolds you let her. 'Twon't do you any harm."

He took it with a chuckling laugh, and she sat

down and began to set careful stitches in the bodice of the flowery silk robe.

"Electra," he inquired over the rim of the glass, "a little deceit is excusable if it's for love, isn't it?"

"Anything," said Electra McCullum, with her thin shoulders and her "old maid's figure," "is excusable if it's for that."

He sipped the cherry shrub.

delectable things to eat. They pulled steadily, persistently. He thought they would drag his arms from their sockets.

Their mother was saying something, half amusing half pathetic, in that wonderful voice of hers, and he didn't want to lose a word of it. He smiled a detached smile at the children. Then he bethought him of something to stop their demands and their pulling and he brought it forth triumphantly—shining new candy that had come as a sample by the morning's mail.

The boy, who was the older, grabbed it and stuffed it into his mouth till his cheeks stuck out. He went off a little way and began to stamp in the dust, kicking up clouds of it as he made what he called a circus ring. But the girl threw herself full length upon the walk, spat out the offending candy, wiped away the taste of it on the gravel and lay there howling in her disgust.

"Oh, kjiddikins! kjiddikins! What will Mr. Rittenhouse think of mother's darlings?" Mrs. Percyfield cried in charming despair. She lifted sweet, appealing eyes to Joey. "It is so difficult, so impossible to be harsh with them when life has been so harsh with me," she whispered brokenly. "I must keep unhappy from them as long as I can." She steadied her trembling lips into a smile of bravery. It was her best trick—a trick that never failed to work with me of Joey Rittenhouse's age.

He saw her through a quick mist of feeling.

A moment later, after pleading instructions to her children, she let Joey take them with him to the store, while she tripped up the path for her last fitting.

Joey Rittenhouse.

Dr. Richel appeared in the store door not more than five minutes later and beckoned to the young proprietor. The children were half buried in a fancy crackle box and he signalled Joey to let them stay there.

"Come across to McCullum's with me a minute," he said briefly.

As they approached the house they heard Mrs. Percyfield's voice. It was excited. It was high pitched. But for certain unmistakable tones of it they would not have known it. It cut the air like a loose wire that twists and hisses. It threw itself out stingingly, then coiled up with a jangle. It was no nice to hear.

The two men paused at the doorstep.

"You've ruined my gown! You've ruined it!" shrieked Mrs. Percyfield from Electra's inner room.

"But I will make you another," Electra said ap- pears



She raged, she berated, she importuned.

"A man ought to get the girl that was meant for him, oughtn't he? And there's no question in your mind, is there, that Minnie Heston is the girl for Joey Rittenhouse?"

"Not a smitch of a question," she declared with emphasis.

He arose and set down his glass. He glanced at the inanimate "double" of the very animate lady against whom he was plotting.

"Then come in here, away from that embarrassing figure, and I'll tell you my plan," he said, holding open the door of her small dining room for her and passing through after her.

At four o'clock that afternoon the Stutsman phaeton, bearing the Percyfield family, or that part of it which remained intact, drove down the village street toward Electra McCullum's. It was a deep, black phaeton drawn by a big black horse. The three Percyfields were in white. The bands of the children's hats were crimson, like the roses of their mother's. Beneath the roses Mrs. Percyfield's hazel eyes looked out searching and found what they were seeking—Joey Rittenhouse swinging down the street.

Also they saw Dr. Richel sauntering leisurely along. And Mrs. Percyfield leaned out and bowed sweetly, if a bit ostentatiously, to the old man whom the town revered.

Reaching Miss McCullum's blithing post, she stepped lightly from the phaeton, untied the hitch strap from the horse's bridle, looked at the post, then at the strap, and then at Joey Rittenhouse, whom she affected to see for the first time. She threw out her hands in a pretty gesture of helplessness and awaited him.

"What should I do without you? I'm such a useless person!" she murmured as he tied the horse and lifted out the small Percyfields.

The instant the children touched terra firma they grabbed Rittenhouse's hands and swung onto him, clamoring to be taken to his store. The store meant candy and raisins and igs and crackers and other de-

lucy. "I'll buy the material and you shall have it for to-morrow night. I promise."

"And what will it be like, the imperious voice demanded. "A horrid, cheap thing that I wouldn't wear. I won't have it. Your impudence in making such a suggestion is amazing. What shall I do? What shall I do? Such carelessness. Such inexcusable ignorance!"

"I was very tired. I'd worked on it half the night. My hands were not quite steady."

"What is it to me how long you had worked?" Mrs. Percyfield screamed. "It's your business, isn't it? When I hire a seamstress to sew for me I expect her to do it without whining about how long it takes. I pay her for her time. Don't try to excuse yourself. It's unforgivable. It's sheer carelessness, I tell you. It's more than I can bear!"

She lost the last slipping hold on herself. She let herself go completely. She raged. She berated. She importuned. She commanded. She laughed. She cried. She had, in short, the worst case of hysteria that the doctor had ever, in all the long years of his experience, encountered.

He looked at Joey Rittenhouse. The boy's face was white.

"I heard her as I came along," the doctor whispered, "and I thought you ought to know, Joey, lad."

Young Rittenhouse did not speak. He turned and hurried back to his store.

When Mrs. Percyfield came out of Electra McCullum's with mottled cheeks and blazing eyes and twitching lips the clerk led her children over to her and untied her horse for her.

That evening, in the protecting dusk, Dr. Richel went again to Electra McCullum's.

Electra looked limp and tired, but triumphant.

"You seen Joey since?" she asked.

The doctor smiled softly, satisfiedly.

"Joey's gone to the city for a few days," he said. "He won't be at the party."